How do graphic novels engage their audience?

In this essay, my goal is to discuss three narrative conventions and how they are used to engage the audience in a graphic novel, the novel I have chosen to base this essay on is Cicada by the author Shaun Tan. Cicada tells the story of a bug-like man named Cicada, and how he is discriminated against in his workplace for years, only to evolve and fly to a better life at the end of the story. The book is intended to be a metaphor for migrant workers and how they are treated within the workplace. The narrative conventions I am going to focus on in this essay are dialogue, symbolism, and imagery.

Dialogue is used within the graphic novel to advance the story and explain the situation that Cicada is in from his own perspective. The dialogue within the story gives an inside look at Cicada, how he doesn't focus on all of the discrimination against him, and all the inner and even sometimes physical pain he experiences, leaving it in the past and describing what's happening in the current moment he's in. Cicada speaks in broken English, which is a further indication to the reader that Cicada represents a migrant worker. I interpret the repetition of the phrase "Tok Tok Tok" to signify the passage of time, how even though he's getting put down, ignored, and beaten, Cicada knows that time will keep moving along and that he won't be there forever. The dialogue within the graphic novel immerses the reader by showing them the thoughts of the poor Cicada.

Another narrative convention used in Cicada is symbolism, which is used to add deeper meaning to the story. Shaun Tan uses symbolism to show the graphic novel's themes of discrimination, belonging and identity to the reader in a way that is easy to understand. Cicada is full of symbolism. The huge, grey, brutal office building in which Cicada works and lives, is dehumanizing in its architecture and design. The dehumanising office space, with its tiny cubicles where Cicada sits on his chair and types for hours is a symbolic representation of real-life workspaces and the way that employees are treated. At the end of the story, Cicada stands on the rooftop, sheds his exoskeleton and flies to a better life, this is also symbolic of him literally leaving his past behind for greater things.

One more narrative convention used within the graphic novel, Cicada, is Imagery. Imagery is used to immerse the reader into the world of the story. Shaun Tan illustrates surreal and immersive settings and characters in his books which are one of the ways he tells the story. Cicada lives in a dull, grey, black and white building where everything is the same, and boring. The walls, floors, people around him, are all in black and white

with the only colour coming from Cicada’s green head. The imagery of Cicada working away trapped in a cubicle that seems too small even for his miniscule size, is a visual representation of how trapped and stuck the character is in a life and job that isn’t rewarding, with people that do not respect him. The imagery adds to the narrative in a way that makes it even more captivating.

In conclusion, in the novel Cicada by the author Shaun Tan uses narrative conventions like Dialogue, Symbolism and Imagery, to engage the audience and tell a compelling story. He uses dialogue to advance the story and show the situation Cicada is in, Symbolism is used to add deeper meaning to the story, and Imagery is used to immerse the reader into Cicada’s world. Shaun Tan is an excellent author and illustrator that uses the narrative conventions to tell his story.

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